



# TBI TODAY

News, Ideas, and Resources from the Virginia TBI Model System

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR EMOTIONS

Part I: After injury, survivors and their family members often experience a variety of strong emotions. Many people describe feeling frustrated, angry, or sad about changes following the injury. Others talk about feeling worried or scared about what will happen in the future. Some people notice that their emotions change quickly, "like a roller coaster." Feeling misunderstood is also common. Strong emotions can weaken your ability to solve problems, handle challenges effectively, and get along with others. Recognizing, understanding, and controlling your feelings can be very difficult.

In the next couple of newsletters, we'll present a series of articles focusing on intense feelings and how to manage them effectively. In this newsletter, we'll present Parts I and II. Part I covers understanding and identifying your emotions. Part II covers barriers to communicating about your feelings. Part III will be included in the next newsletter and will focus on ways to manage intense emotions effectively.

The first step in controlling your emotions is recognizing how you feel and noticing when your emotions get in the way. If you can figure out how you're feeling early on, you can get your feelings under control faster and more easily. Then you'll be able to feel better and reach your goals more efficiently.

Take a moment to think about how you feel. Check off the boxes next to the sentences that describe you –

Review the items you've checked and the ones you haven't to better understand your feelings. The more items you've checked, the more likely it is that you are experiencing many different and strong emotions. Is there a pattern to the items you've checked? Show your checklist to someone you know and trust. Do you agree on the items that should be checked?

Once you recognize how you feel, you can take steps to help yourself cope with the emotions effectively. Talking about your feelings is an important first step to feeling better. But, many people have trouble talking about their feelings. In Part II (below), we'll talk about common barriers that keep people from talking with others about their feelings.

Part II: Talking about your feelings may be difficult. People often say they worry about what others will think of them. Others say they don't know who to turn to or who they can trust. Think about what gets in the way of talking to others about your feelings. The questionnaire on the following page will help you figure out the answer. Circle T (True) or F (False) to figure out the challenges you face in talking about your emotions.

- I often feel frustrated.
- I get angry easily.
- I can't do much to make things better.
- I don't like much about myself.
- I worry a lot.
- I have made many mistakes.
- I worry about the future.
- I'm lonely.
- I believe I am at fault for many of my family's problems.
- I feel sad.
- I cry over the least little thing.
- People don't understand me.
- I feel overwhelmed.
- My feelings change from minute to minute.
- I get upset easily.
- Very few people care about me.
- I have many fears.
- I feel like I should be doing more.
- I'm disappointed in myself.
- I wish my life could be the way it was before.
- I am often grouchy.
- Sometimes I feel I'm on top of the world.

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Look over your answers with family, friends, or trusted professionals. Think about the main things that are getting in the way of talking about your feelings.

- ▶ Is it that you feel like other people don't understand you or don't care?
- ▶ Do you feel uncomfortable around other people or uncomfortable talking about feelings?
- ▶ Do you have trouble recognizing how you feel or describing your feelings to other people?
- ▶ Do you worry about being able to trust others with per-

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|---|---|-----|--|
| T | F | 1.  | My feelings change from day to day.                        |
| T | F | 2.  | Nobody understands what I am going through.                |
| T | F | 3.  | I feel uncomfortable around other people.                  |
| T | F | 4.  | I'm worried about what others think of me.                 |
| T | F | 5.  | Nobody cares about me.                                     |
| T | F | 6.  | I have a hard time describing my feelings.                 |
| T | F | 7.  | I don't want to burden people with my feelings.            |
| T | F | 8.  | I feel uncomfortable talking about my feelings.            |
| T | F | 9.  | I don't know where to turn for help.                       |
| T | F | 10. | I can't hide my feelings like I used to.                   |
| T | F | 11. | I'm afraid to show my true feelings.                       |
| T | F | 12. | I don't want to upset people by talking about my feelings. |
| T | F | 13. | I'm afraid to let my guard down.                           |
| T | F | 14. | I keep my feelings bottled up.                             |
| T | F | 15. | I don't know how I'm feeling.                              |
| T | F | 16. | I don't feel anything anymore.                             |

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Each of these issues may get in the way of you talking to others about your feelings. Remember that talking to others about your feelings is a big step toward feeling better. Often, you need support from others to be able to deal with difficult emotions, so you can handle your responsibilities effectively. Asking for help lets people know that you value their support and involvement and offers chances to build relationships. Talk to trusted family, friends, and professionals about your feelings and about ways to cope with strong emotions. They may be able to give you some good ideas about ways to cope with your feelings.

We've talked to lots of survivors and their families to find out ways they cope with strong feelings. Here are a few strategies that have worked for other people. Look over this list and pick out which ones you think will work for you and your family:

- ▶ **Remember that ups and downs are normal parts of life.** Realize that your feelings are a common, normal response to your experience. Try to look forward to the ups!
- ▶ **Stop the cycle before your emotions get too intense.** Watch out for early warning signs of intense emotions. It's harder to calm down once they get out of control.
- ▶ **Intense emotions often come in response to stress.** Monitor your stress level and take steps to control your stress. Some stress management strategies actually work

well for dealing with intense emotions too.

- ▶ **Be hopeful and positive.** Say positive things to yourself and others (e.g., "I will make it through this," "I'm trying my hardest," "I'm a good person"). Try to keep a good sense of humor.
- ▶ **Recognize the difficulties and challenges you face, and how hard you are working to make things better.** Give yourself credit when you control your emotions and express your feelings in positive ways.

This column was written by Laura Taylor and Jeff Kreutzer from the VCU TBI Model System Family Support Research Program. The program teaches families how to deal with stress and intense emotions. For more information about the program, please contact Laura at 804-828-3703, toll free at 866-286-6904, or by email at [taylorla@vcu.edu](mailto:taylorla@vcu.edu).

## EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT PROJECT



VCU's TBI Model System includes a research project to better understand how to look at emotional adjustment after brain injury. Participants for this study need to have had a traumatic brain injury and be at least 18 years old. If you have questions about the project or would like to be involved, please call *Jenny Marwitz* at: (804) 828-3704 or toll free (866) 296-6904, or email her at [jhmarwit@vcu.edu](mailto:jhmarwit@vcu.edu).

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